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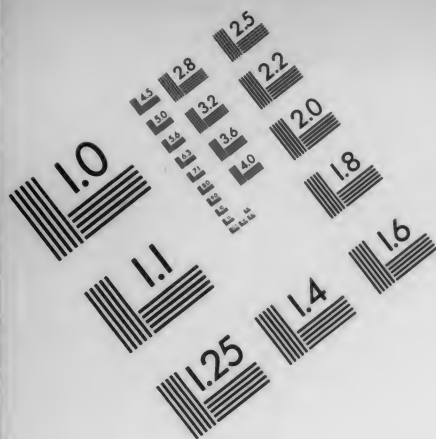
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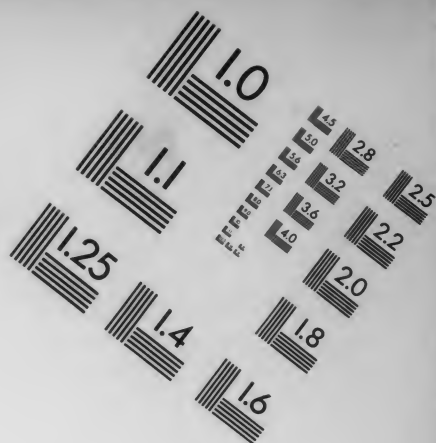
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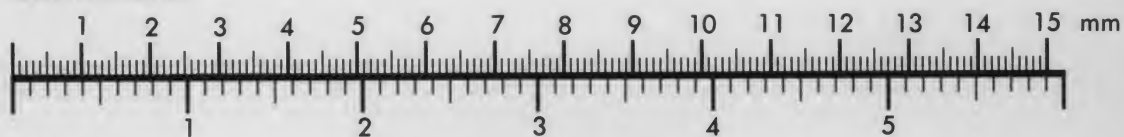
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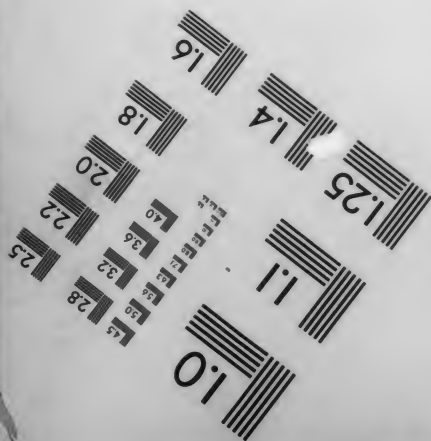
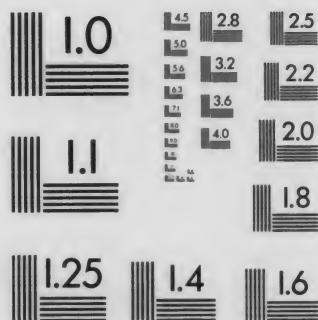
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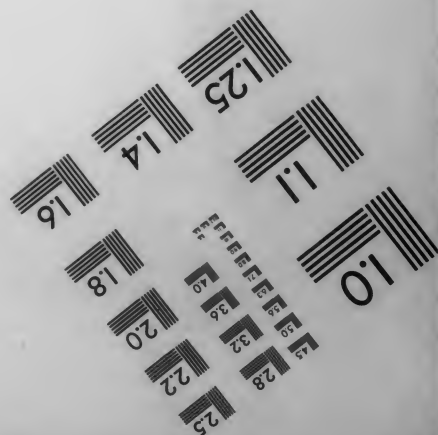
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No 16

# Science and Human Immortality

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By J. H. PHILLIPS,  
Birmingham, Ala.

1909



City Paper Company  
Printers, Birmingham, Alabama  
1909

## Science and Human Immortality

\*By J. H. PHILLIPS, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

The question of human immortality has long been one of the world's greatest enigmas. Of all the great questions asked by man, the most persistent, the most momentous, is this: "Does my personality involve any element that can survive the death of the body?" In varying degrees this question interests all mankind,—the sinner and the saint, the fool and the philosopher, the illiterate peasant and the cultured man of science.

The subject has usually been relegated to the realm of religion and metaphysics, and for the vast majority of mankind, no doubt, faith rather than reason must ever be the basis of hope for a life beyond the grave.

In this brief study I wish to consider the attitude of modern science towards this question and to present some of the modern phases of scientific inquiry with special reference to their implications and future possibilities.

Natural science professes to treat only of that which may be tested by human experience and explained by the operation of natural law. The majority of our physicists have therefore fought shy of the great question of the soul's immortality, and have passed it over without ceremony to theology and metaphysics. Huxley tells us that he invented the word "agnostic" to denote people like himself, who confessed themselves hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatize with the utmost confidence. One of the questions covered by the term "agnostic" is that of the soul's immortality. The word "agnostic" is thus a colorless term, used to denote a lack of scientific evidence as a basis of belief, and expresses the natural attitude of science as such with regard to the matter. On the other hand, John Fiske, the most profound and scientific exponent of the evolutionary theory that America has yet produced confesses that this question must ever remain an affair of religion rather than of science; that "it is not likely that we shall ever succeed in making it a matter of scientific demon-

\*A paper read before the Quid Pro Quo Club.



stration, because we lack the requisite data." Many scientists, however, notwithstanding the limitations of the subject, have not hesitated to overleap the boundaries of the field of experience and to express conclusions that must be regarded as dogmatic and irrelevant. As an example of the position of this class of positive scientists, I may quote from Buchner's *Force and Matter*: "In the eternal cycle of matters and forces, nothing is mortal; but this only holds good collectively and for the whole, while the individual is subject to unceasing changes of genesis and decay. While force and matter as such manifest their indestructibility in an incontrovertible manner, which rests upon experiments, the same cannot be said of the soul, which is only the effect or product of a definite combination of materials and forces, subject to disassociation. If we break a watch, it will no longer tell the time of day; if we kill the nightingale, its song subsides."

Professor Haeckel of Jena occupies practically the same position, and concludes that the "belief in the immortality of the human soul is a dogma which is in hopeless contradiction with the most solid empirical truth of modern science." He says, "when we take the idea of immortality in the widest sense and extend it to the totality of the knowable universe, it has a scientific significance; it is then not merely acceptable, but self-evident to the monistic philosopher. In that sense the thesis of the indestructibility and eternal duration of all that exists is equivalent to our supreme law of nature,—the law of substance." . . . "If we adhere to the monistic idea of substance,—the simplest element of our whole world system, we find energy and matter inseparably associated in it. We must therefore distinguish in the substance of the soul the characteristic psychic energy which is all we perceive, and the psychic matter which is the inseparable basis of its activity,—that is, the living protoplasm."

It is evident from the statements of these eminent scientists that their conclusions are based, in the first place, upon the hypothesis that matter is the only reality and the sole expression of the universal substance; and, in the second place, upon the assumption that the mind, with all its manifestations, is to be interpreted as a product of the physical organism; that thought is a function of the brain; that the soul is an effect with matter as a cause.

The first of these positions is obviously beyond the realm of experimental proof, and is based upon assumed metaphysical grounds. If I deal in metaphysical terms, it is because science in her conclusions has shifted her position into the field of metaphysics. Matter itself is an abstraction; it is a convenient generalization invented to designate the substratum of forces and their operations in the physical world. All that we know of matter are its sensible qualities which come to us through forces—gravitative, cohesive,

repulsive, chemical and electrical, or through forms of motion like heat, light and sound. Matter itself is unknown and unknowable; it is merely a metaphysical fiction used to designate the phenomena of the physical series. That mind or soul or spirit is likewise an abstraction used to designate another parallel series of phenomena known as the psychical series we must also admit. But it is obviously unphilosophical for the scientist to take one abstraction as a club to destroy another abstraction. We know not what matter is in its essence any more than we know what mind is. All that we do know consists of two parallel series of phenomena, the physical and the psychical. Which is the cause and which the effect, we have no means of knowing; nor have we any basis for asserting that either is a cause and the other an effect. Materialistic monism claims reality for the physical series only, and is expressed tersely by the famous remark of Cabanis that "the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile." Spiritualism, following the idealism of Berkeley, assumes that the psychical series is the only real, and may be expressed in the words of Charles Kingsley—"Your soul makes your body as the snail makes its shell." Against these two extreme views, philosophical dualism asserts the genetic independence of both series,—that both mind and matter are real and separable essences. As a compromise between the dualist and the materialistic monist, we find the analytical monist, who asserts that the universe is one, that body and soul, matter and spirit, are but different aspects, the outside and the inside of the same thing—the original substance; that nature is one, with a dual aspect, distinguishable in thought, but inseparable in existence.

I have given this brief analysis of the fundamental problem of philosophy in order that we may more clearly understand the position of those scientists who adhere to what Professor James calls the "theory of production" as applied to the origin of the human soul. The position of materialistic monism, as represented by Haeckel and Buchner, seems to be in its last analysis practically the same as that of the analytical monist, who interprets matter and mind as dual aspects of the one original substance. Haeckel in defining his position says: "Matter, or infinitely extended substance, and spirit, or energy, or sensitive and thinking substance, are the fundamental attributes or principal properties of the all-embracing divine essence of the world, the universal substance." This "universal substance" is the ultimate monad,—the something elemental and indivisible, and matter and spiritual energy are its co-ordinate attributes. His law of substance,—the persistence of matter and energy, he applies to the one but not to the other. He concedes immortality to matter, one of the attributes of the "universal substance," but denies it to spirit, its co-ordinate attribute. He invests the

atom with a spiritual as well as a material property; the latter he immortalizes, the former he destroys. This seems to me to be his fatal point of departure from the true spirit of the monistic interpretation which he professes to follow. Here he diverges from the mature conclusions of Kant, Virchow and DuBois Raymond, and joins company with Buchner, Vogt, and Cabaniss. He has a perfect right to assume that what cannot be scientifically proven in soul life does not exist, but he must carry the same assumption into the realm of matter. Consistent treatment requires that to both matter and mind, as co-ordinate attributes, immortality must be either positively ascribed or as positively denied. In the conclusion of his notable book, Haeckel with noble candor confesses that "We do not know 'the thing in itself,' that lies behind these knowable phenomena."

The second contention of these scientists now remains to be considered: The organism of the body in its relation to the mind, they hold, bears the relation of cause to an effect; spirit is a force or energy developed by molecular activity in the brain. Perhaps the most explicit statement of the production theory is that given by Cabaniss: "To acquire a just idea of the operations from which thought results, we must consider the brain as a particular organ especially destined to produce it; just as the stomach and intestines are destined to operate digestion, the liver to filter bile, the parotid and maxillary glands to prepare the salivary juices. The function proper of the brain is that of receiving each particular impression, of attaching signs to it, of combining the different impressions, of comparing them with each other, of drawing from them judgments and resolves; just as the function of the stomach is to act upon the nutritive substances whose presence excites it, to dissolve them, and to assimilate their juices to our nature. We see the food materials fall into the viscus (of the stomach) with their own proper qualities; we see them emerge with new qualities, and we infer that the stomach is really the author of this alteration. Similarly, we see the impressions reaching the brain by the intermediation of the nerves; they then are isolated and without coherence. The viscus enters into action; it acts upon them and soon it emits them metamorphosed into ideas, to which the language of physiognomy or gesture, or the signs of speech and writing, give an outward expression. We conclude then, with an equal certitude, that the brain digests, as it were, the impressions; that it performs organically the secretion of thought."

The main scientific objection to a belief in the immortality of the soul is thus clearly stated by Cabaniss, and is a plausible physiological argument; it is certainly exercising a tremendous influence today among men of science, and is

either tacitly encouraged or directly taught in a great many of our medical colleges and scientific schools.

It will be noted that the word "impression" on account of its ambiguity is made to play an important part in Cabaniss' statement. "To conclude with certitude," that the brain "digests impressions and performs organically the secretion of thought," is an excellent example of an argument by analogy and of a conclusion based upon metaphor instead of scientific fact. Other and more recent statements of the production theory regard thought as a kind of force liberated by chemical changes in the brain, which give rise to ideas and emotions." Herbert Spencer, usually classed with Huxley as an agnostic, upon this question seems to favor this theory. "The law of metamorphosis," he says, "which holds good among the physical forces, holds equally between them and the mental forces." "How this is done," he further says, "is a mystery which it is impossible to fathom."

Professor James, in his Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard on Human Immortality, has answered this physiological objection in a unique and interesting manner. He admits the statement of facts as given by the materialist, and even assumes the correctness of the much quoted formula—"Thought is a function of the brain." But he maintains as his thesis that personal immortality is not incompatible with such a statement. When the physiologist uses the phrase—"Thought is a function of the brain," he thinks of it just as he does when he says—"Steam is a function of the tea-kettle," or, "Light is a function of the electric current." These material objects create or generate their effects; so the brain is supposed by the materialist to create or generate thought. Of course, if this creation or generation is the function of the brain, then, when the brain perishes, the soul must die. But, in the physical world, productive function is not the only kind of function with which we are familiar. We have a releasing function, as when the trigger of the crossbow releases the string and lets the bow fly back to its natural shape; or when the hammer falls upon a detonating compound, releases the molecular obstruction and lets the gases resume their normal bulk. We are also familiar with the transmissive function; in the case of a prism or refracting lens, the energy of light is sifted, limited in color, and determined as to its shape, direction and intensity. The lens does not produce the light, it merely limits and determines its transmission. James maintains that in regarding thought as a function of the brain, it is not necessary to think of the productive function only; we are entitled to consider what the scientist usually leaves out of account, the permissive or transmissive function of the brain. "Suppose the whole universe of material things to be a surface-veil, hiding and keeping back the world of genuine realities that are seeking expression through material things. Suppose our

brains are such thin and half-transparent places in this surrounding veil; then the genuine reality, the life of the soul, as it is in its fullness, may break through our several brains into this world in all sorts of restricted, imperfect and distorted forms, according to the peculiarities of the individual brain which forms the medium of transmission." But, it may be asked, is there any evidence in favor of this transmission theory? Has any one ever discovered gleams of thought breaking through this brain-veil from the larger consciousness without? No. What then? Ask for any proof or evidence of the fact that the brain produces thought, and science has none to give. If one theory is fantastic, so is the other. If the transmission theory is transcendental, the production theory is equally so. Ask for an explanation of the exact process of either theory, and science confesses herself impotent. In speaking of thought as a function of the brain, science can mean nothing but concomitant variation. All that science can gather from observation of facts is uniform concomitance. Along with every act of consciousness we will find a molecular change in the substance of the brain which involves a waste of tissue and disintegration of cellular matter. This is all that science can assert, and all "talk about either production or transmission as a process is pure metaphysical hypothesis."

James' interpretation of brain function as *transmission* rather than *production* robs materialism of its fatal consequence. It admits all the real facts that science presents, and at the same time makes possible, if not probable, the survival of the soul after death. Professor James in his argument simply demonstrates the invalidity of the objections of science to the doctrine of immortality. If science objects to the reasoning of the idealist as metaphysical, James proves that science herself in the very statement of her objections enters the field of metaphysics, and must be driven back to her own domain. No real science should be content to rest the validity of her conclusions upon abstractions, inferences and analogies.

The theory of transmission as an explanation of the relation of the spiritual to the material has already assumed prominence in the philosophy of pragmatism. Schiller, in his great work entitled the "Riddles of the Sphinx," develops the theory at length from the standpoint of evolution. He says: "The fact that material organization rises in complexity and power with the development of consciousness does not justify the inference that it is the cause of the development of consciousness. If growth in complexity is accepted as the universal law of evolution in all things, there need be no causal relation between the increasing complexity of physical organism and gradual development of consciousness." Again, "If the world process represents a gradual harmonizing of the Deity and the Ego, it must bring with it an increase in

the intercourse and interaction between them. The greater intensity and the greater number of relations between the Ego and the Deity would generate an intenser consciousness on the one side (i. e., the Soul) and a more complex organization on the other (the body). Thus the materialist explanation of the fact would in both of these cases be a fallacy of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc*, and confuse a parallelism due to a common origin, with causal dependence. . . . The material organization in the evolution of the individual is a mechanism which sets free consciousness. . . . Matter is an admirably calculated machinery for regulating, limiting and restraining the consciousness which it encases. So, if the organism is coarse and simple, as in the lower animals; it permits only a little intelligence to permeate through; if delicate and complex, there are greater possibilities for the manifestations of consciousness." Schiller makes the present life unreal on account of the resistance of the physical organism to the impressing consciousness of the Divine, and says that the hypnotic or dream-consciousness bears the same relation to the normal consciousness that the normal bears to the ultimate. "In each case," he says, "the lower is related to the higher as the actual to the potential; while we sleep, our dream-consciousness is all that is actual, and our waking self exists only potentially; while we live on earth, our normal consciousness alone is actual, and our true selves are the ideals of unrealized aspirations. On this analogy then we may say that the lower animals are still entranced in the lower stages of brute lethargy, while we have passed into the higher phase of somnambulism, which already permits us strange glimpses of a lucidity that divines the realities of a transcendent world. In the course of evolution our conception of the interaction between us and the Deity would come to correspond more and more to reality, until at the completion of the process, the last thin veil would be rent asunder, and the perfected spirits would behold the undimmed splendor of truth in the light of the countenance of God." The pragmatic philosophy of Schiller seems to find most striking and substantial confirmation in that of St. Paul—For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even also as I am known.

It is evident that neither the production theory nor the transmission theory offers any conclusive scientific explanation of the genesis of the soul or of its relation to the body. Nervous physiology teaches us only that each particular mental act is accompanied by a particular cerebral act. Science is nothing but the codification of experience and is helpless without the data furnished by observation. The belief in immortality requires evidence that the phenomena we call mental can subsist apart from the phenomena we call material. This evidence science cannot furnish until we have had some de-



monstrable experimental knowledge of a human soul dissociated from the human body.

If we grant that the two theories presented,—the production theory and the transmission theory,—are of equal validity or invalidity, as you please; if we admit that the two simply balance each other in their evidential claims, which should we as pragmatists prefer? Let us apply the test of pragmatism. Both theories being admittedly equal so far as scientific evidence is concerned, we must trace the practical consequences of each. What difference would it make to anybody whether the one or the other be true? If no practical difference in their consequences for the future can be seen, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing and further discussion would be useless. But it does make an enormous difference, and as a matter of fact, pragmatism finds in the transmission explanation overwhelming practical reasons for preference. With John Fiske, we find it difficult to believe that man's highest spiritual qualities, upon the development of which so much creative energy has been expended, must at last prove ephemeral, "like a bubble that bursts or a vision that fades." To say nothing of the various theological and metaphysical reasons for a belief in a future life, the value of such a belief as a practical incentive for the right ordering of our present life becomes an important element in the scale of reason, and with Voltaire and Rousseau, we must defend the life of the soul after the decay of the body in spite of theoretical difficulties, on the ground of its practical necessity. The pragmatist takes this chance, because, as Edmund Gurney says,—*"It is this that makes all the difference between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope."*

There is still another reason for the pragmatistic assumption. Psycho-physics and physiological psychology by the production theory and its inevitable consequences, lead us up against a blind wall; they abruptly close and seal the book of life both for this world and the next, with the last human breath. The transmission theory, on the other hand, leaves an open door for a future science of psychology to receive and interpret an important class of alleged psychic facts, which ultimately may be found to harmonize with it, and which eventually may provide the desired experimental proof of human immortality.

Psychology as a science today has done little more than to record the leading facts of our normal consciousness. As a science of the soul in its totality of manifestation, it must be still regarded as in a nascent stage. It is little more than what chemistry and astronomy were a few hundred years ago in their dim and blind beginnings, when a few Monks in their cloisters sought the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life, and the Chaldean shepherds reverently watched the

courses of the stars. Pragmatism recognizes as a possibility the rise of another Priestly or Newton who will yet reduce psychology to a practical science like chemistry and astronomy. It awaits the advent of another Columbus, who shall discover for us a new world.

It is a mistaken idea that science needs only facts for the advancement of truth. Of what use are facts, if men having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not? The facts of electricity, radium and the Roentgen ray bombarded mankind for ages before they found the observant eye and the attentive ear. "The three important factors in the progress of science," says Schiller, "are fact, interpretation and prejudice, and the greatest of these is prejudice." It is prejudice that determines the interpretation, and interpretation in turn selects and determines the facts. A formidable array of eccentric psychic phenomena have bombarded humanity for ages, and they still continue to interest and entertain us; but as they chance to run counter to the preconceived ideas of theology and science, they generally meet with ridicule and jest rather than serious investigation. The phenomena of Witchcraft, Swedenborgianism, Dream-consciousness, Multiple Personality, Spiritism and a long line of exceptional psychic manifestations extending down to Christian Science and the Emanuel Movement of our day, stand out boldly as a challenge to modern science. The Society of Psychical Research during the past twenty-five years, under the leadership of such eminent scientists as Myers, Podmore, Gurney, Hodgson, Wallace and Sir William Crookes, has accumulated a mass of facts and experimental data; and while these pioneers have exposed much of fraud, humbug and imposture, they have also succeeded in establishing at least the canons of a new science. The most important exposition of the society's investigations up to the present time is the great work of Frederick Myers on "Human Personality." Of this work Mr. Schiller says, after a critical review, that "Myers' interpretation has for the first time rendered a future life scientifically conceivable and rendered much more probable the other considerations in its favor. And, above all, it has rendered it definitely provable." One of the great merits of Myers' work is the fact that it is thoroughly scientific in its spirit and method. His demand throughout is for further observation and keener experimentation. It may well be that in the future the successors of Myers and his colleagues may gradually develop a body of consistent interpretations of the human consciousness as a whole, "and then," as Mr. Schiller remarks, "human immortality will be scientifically proved. Until then, it will remain a matter of belief, however probable it grows."

All these exceptional psychic experiences will naturally prove paradoxical and meaningless under the production theory of mental life; but under the transmission theory we

need only to suppose our normal consciousness to be in touch with a larger consciousness beyond, and the variations will be explicable by the possible changes in the brain as the medium of transmission.

We are prepared today to recognize the operation of natural law in the spiritual world; we have become familiar with its operation within spheres hitherto regarded as supernatural. Superstition is gradually yielding to knowledge and faith still presses forward into the larger fields beyond. The naturalization of the supernatural is a historical process upon which we dare not impose a limit. Side by side with this process, we find the increasing spiritualization of matter. The gulf between the properties of matter and those of spirit is constantly diminishing, and the analogies between material and spiritual phenomena are becoming more and more conspicuous. The modern scientific conception of matter, with its invisible forces, its impalpable energies, and its imponderable substances, is something quite different from the simple matter of primitive experience and common life. The spiritualization of matter and the naturalization of the supernatural seem to indicate the development of matter and spirit along converging lines, and when their processes transcend the limits of the sensible and the powers of the finite, their manifestations may merge into the one ultimate and indestructible reality, existent under forms and conditions now incomprehensible.

But, at present, in the absence of demonstrable evidence of the truth of any scientific theory as to the origin or destiny of the human soul, I am willing to risk my personal belief in human immortality upon other than scientific grounds, and to conclude with Professor James: "The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although, in the main, their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. By being faithful in my poor measure to this over-belief, I seem to myself to keep more sane and true."